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## Iranian Students' Experience of K-12 and Higher Education: Use of Drawings to Convey the Difference Between Ideals and Reality

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### Abstract

The focus of education during K-12 and Higher Education (HE) in Iran is on theoretical empowerment of students; therefore, our students get an illusion of knowing. In fact, what happens is not learning and understanding; rather, it is verbatim transfer of available information in the textbooks into the students' minds. It might be because the students and teachers (as the main stakeholders of the education) are the least powerful parties within the pyramid of power amongst educational practitioners and policymakers. It means their voice, feedback, needs, and ideologies have no place in the educational decisions and policies. In alignment with the mainstream of the present research; it is an innovative idea to explore the students' living/ studying experience during K-12, and their ideals and expectations from higher education studies. To do so, we asked 60 university students to portray their experience (in a phenomenological research design) concerning living and studying through K-12 and their ideals and expectations from Higher Education. Students' drawings are the main source of data collection and inductive analysis of data is administered to find students' responses which are categorized under three major and six minor themes, respectively.

### Keywords

students' drawings, phenomenological research design, K-12 educational system, higher education, Iranian educational context

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# **Iranian Students' Experience of K-12 and Higher Education: Use of Drawings to Convey the Difference Between Ideals and Reality**

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The focus of education during K-12 and Higher Education (HE) in Iran is on theoretical empowerment of students; therefore, our students get an illusion of knowing. In fact, what happens is not learning and understanding; rather, it is verbatim transfer of available information in the textbooks into the students' minds. It might be because the students and teachers (as the main stakeholders of the education) are the least powerful parties within the pyramid of power amongst educational practitioners and policymakers. It means their voice, feedback, needs, and ideologies have no place in the educational decisions and policies. In alignment with the mainstream of the present research; it is an innovative idea to explore the students' living/ studying experience during K-12, and their ideals and expectations from higher education studies. To do so, we asked 60 university students to portray their experience (in a phenomenological research design) concerning living and studying through K-12 and their ideals and expectations from Higher Education. Students' drawings are the main source of data collection and inductive analysis of data is administered to find students' responses which are categorized under three major and six minor themes, respectively.

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## **Teachers and Students: Roles and Voice through K-12 and Higher Education**

Students are not confined to the school contexts and college campuses. Rather, they are supposed to join the social community and adopt a new role based on their proficiencies and capabilities. In line with this premise, teaching happens to empower students with preliminary skills for living out of the school and college where divergent competing ideologies are living together. So, students' competency for commencement of a new professional life is obligatory to survive as a successful social member. Cushman (1994) raised some critical questions concerning students' empowerment in schools which must be considered if educational success is at the top of our policies:

How might they take on a more active and independent role in the classroom, using their teachers as coaches and not deliverers of knowledge? Did they have the right to pursue their own interests in the curriculum, or to follow fewer subjects in greater depth? How could they obtain the democratic governance that would give them a true voice in school policy and decision-making? In their brief tenure as students, how could they turn isolated instances of empowerment into a unified nationwide movement that represented their needs and concerns? (p. 1)

Access to education is an obvious and inevitable right for all throughout the world. The optimum goals of education throughout K-12 and Higher Education might be the same among educational policymakers and leaders. However, life changes and students also need to be acquainted with the pertinent skills to help them succeed in a life overwhelmed with social, cultural, religious, and economic divergences, problems, and crises. It would be also of great importance in the current era of non-stop rapid race of information access and technological advancements where borderlines among villages, cities, countries, and continents have no sense. So, the goal of education must be more than transmission of knowledge; rather, students' character and personality must be shaped or even reshaped through living in the schools and universities by collaboration with teachers and their peers. It is of great importance to note that Goldman and Newman (1998) in the preface of their book illuminated that:

[L]ost in today's push for academic excellence is the vital importance of seemingly "unmeasurable skills." Love, friendship, integrity, compassion, faith, hope- these are but a few of the many intangibles that determine the quality of our society yet cannot be directly measured. Therefore, they are often left out of the education equation. (p. x)

We highlight that the educational policies must be in alignment with the rapid global advancements and changes. It means that the students must be proficient enough to join the society as soon as they complete their public education; or university graduates must be able to adopt different social roles based on their intuitions, developed capabilities, and enriched character. All these cannot be obtained if our educational policies (K-12 and Higher Education) fail to provide an enriched curriculum and syllabi which meets the urgency of needs, challenges, and advancements of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Hogg (2018) also illuminated:

As an experienced teacher who has worked in high schools and universities, I believe regular interrogation of my practice is important, so I can ascertain how well I am addressing the changing learning needs of my students. I aim to approach learning in ways that engage students' hearts, minds, and bodies. This is what active engagement means to me – a full experience to connect with and advance students' thinking and ideas. (p. 308)

Hopefully, students and teachers are aware of their needs and experience the urgency of a change of focus in their roles within the classroom contexts which exemplify the real roles, duties, and rights out of the schools and universities. In line with this urgency of change in educational stakeholders' roles, teachers are no longer considered as the knowledge packages in the schools who are just recruited to transmit their knowledge into students' minds who had been considered as empty boxes whose destiny is to participate in schools just to be bombarded with blocks of knowledge in a spoon-feeding style of teaching practice. It is believed that teachers must take different roles (e.g., peer, counsellor, or role model), so students will enthusiastically participate in the classes to learn the basics of a social life. Daniels (2011), for instance, indicates that "in nearly every survey and interview, students identify teachers as contributing to or detracting from their desire to do their class work or to engage in school. The ways in which teachers relate to students is extremely important" (p. 33). Therefore, teachers play a pivotal role in students' life out of the schools as Smith et al. (2019) highlighted that "I guess that I became a teacher because of my very positive experiences of education. I had very inspirational teachers and realised how much of a difference a teacher can make in somebody's life" (p. 48). Suriano et al. (2018) also emphasized:

Teachers need to know that they play a significant role in the success of their students and that of the school as a whole. Teachers must be celebrated for their successes, provided support from a variety of sources, and empowered to innovate in their instructional practices. (p. 129)

Learning does not happen in a vacuum; rather, it is a dialogic practice. It means that the clichéd roles in a class community are no longer of use in the current era of divergent competing roles. Teachers and teacher trainers must remember that the definition of teaching as transmission of knowledge from teachers to students' minds has now been rejected for some decades. In the same line, Safari (2017) believes that teachers must be "transformative intellectuals ... [as] this role enables teachers to focus on marginalized students' lived experiences and worlds to transform them into active and critical citizens who are emancipated to develop their voices and question the status quo" (p. 74). In such a case, reform occurs in teaching practice, and learning happens in a community of knowledge sharing rather than transmission of knowledge. As it is discussed above, learning must happen in a context where all participants are engaged in teaching practice; hence, teachers as all-knowing persons are no longer of use in pre- and in-service courses for student teachers. It is also true that change of focus from transmission to sharing (which is one of the prerequisites of dialogue and communication in the classrooms) highlights the importance of recently occurred reforms in teaching methodologies (change of focus from Grammar Translation Method to Communicative Language Teaching in English language courses within the context of Iran, for instance); as acknowledgement of students' needs, rights, and voices is a key to success of national syllabi and curricula. Gratton and Chadburn (2019) also stressed the importance of "developing systems of student agency and self-advocacy in education" (p. 1) to help students achieve an active role in their learning practice. Empowerment of students with much more skills than basics of knowledge is a key for success of educational policies to train proficient capable students within school boundaries, and citizens of larger societies in the long run. Throughout the world, it is expected that the students' participation in schools and classrooms based on the pre-specified and developed syllabi helps them learn how to argue, criticize, persuade, voice, cooperate, think, participate, compete, challenge, manage, lead, coach, decide, revive, and live; however, studying the bases of knowledge and living inside the schools, in most cases, remain at the theoretical level and lead to mere transmission of knowledge rather than training human beings (which is largely discussed in recent teaching training courses, symposiums, conferences, and nation-wide reports throughout the world). In alignment with these concerns, Blanco-Pérez, et al. (2019) also raise major questions which must be considered by educational practitioners and policymakers worldwide as:

how to educate and empower citizenship; the need to redefine human values; how to develop critical thinking and understanding in our contemporary societies; the future of educational institutions amid the rapid economic and social transformation enabled by technological disruption; training and instruction to prepare for increasingly complex economies and societies; the prospects for a new paradigm of national and global governance. (p. 146)

It is a globally acknowledged trend throughout the world, but policy-makers' focus on the enumerated skills is different among countries and educational systems. King (2019) also highlighted the importance of teachers' belief concerning students' empowerment as:

[m]any of us as teachers or teacher educators entered the profession to make a difference. We had a moral purpose. For me that moral purpose was and

continues to be about inclusion and enabling all learners to be active participants in our schools, communities, and wider society. This involves focusing on learners' individual strengths and engaging them in learning that is meaningful to them in their context. (p. 169)

In the same line, Seaton (2018) also mentioned that “[i]t is posited that a teacher’s own mindset belief and practice is vital to supporting students to consider their own mindsets and to develop thinking strategies to support their learning” (p. 43). To obtain the optimum results in this regard and train successful teachers and students respectively, Dassa and Nichols (2020) stressed the importance of teachers’ engagement within research practice; hence, they will be able to critically analyze the surrounding community to meet the society and students’ needs. They also believe that “[t]he profession of education has become increasingly complex, requiring teachers to be involved in daily teacher duties but also reflective practice throughout the academic school year” (Dassa & Nichols, 2020, p. 1). Therefore, one way to succeed in teacher training courses and everyday classrooms is to work simultaneously on theory and practice. It also needs to be mentioned that no changes and modifications will happen in our educational systems as McQuillan (2005) indicated that “student empowerment is difficult to enact because doing so requires not only altering traditional structures and practices but changing beliefs and values as well, in particular how we conceptualize the most fundamental element of our educational system: students” (p. 665).

It also needs to be highlighted that K-12 policies (for students within the age range of 6-18) must be in line with the higher education policies as both are to be complementary rather than peculiar and disparate. Universities and higher education institutes have undergone numerous changes and modifications in terms of their roles and duties towards their internal and external communities. Teaching for the mere transmission of theoretical knowledge is not the top priority of most universities; rather, emerged roles as entrepreneurial universities or social responsibilities of universities urged the authorities of the universities and higher education policy makers to revise and change their earlier devised strategic plans. Universities and colleges were developed with a mere teaching duty; it then changed to teaching and research activities. It means that production of knowledge and the use of knowledge in collaboration with the industry was a paramount goal in higher education policies. Then, we witnessed the urgency of entrepreneurial universities to train proficient graduates who can immediately join the available job vacancies within the society. And social responsibilities of the universities as well as organization adaptation are recently extensively discussed within the higher education communities and government policy-making bodies. In this regard, there should be a mutual relationship between the universities and societies. The university must meticulously monitor the available challenges and crises of the outside community and provide immediate constructive solutions to improve the quality of the public’s life and the larger society as well. Therefore, universities try to simultaneously check the surrounding societies and even beyond the countries’ borders to identify current local and global trends and work extensively to find solutions for society’s needs with a meticulous eye toward the future. To do this, universities are obliged to train students who have the potential to help societies move towards success and prosperity. In one instance, universities must be aware of their students’ employability chance after graduation as it is one of their goals. Omar et al. (2017), for instance, emphasized that “[g]iving students the skills they need to become independent learners allow them to flourish in both academia and onwards into the world of work” (p. 1).

In this regard, it is a key point to consider the educational changes as well as the shift in the key players of K-12 and Higher Education - students and teachers. So, it is vital to consider these changes in K-12 to prepare students (within early years of education with an age range of 6-18 when students’ character and personality is shaped) for success in higher

education. Further, it must happen in alignment with the changes and advancements of the global trends, needs, and changes in all sectors and in education as well.

### **K-12 and Higher Education in Iran: Teachers, Students, and Pyramid of Policymaking**

Iranian students are provided with free compulsory public education which happens during three yearly timeslots of 6-3-3, while kindergarten is not an obligatory training level in the educational cycle of Iran. It also needs to be mentioned that K-12 was running, for years, as 5 (Primary School), 3 (Secondary School), 3 (High School), and 1 (Pre-university) which recently changed to the new cycle (6-3-3) during an educational reform. K-12 in Iran is supervised by the Ministry of Education which has its own General Offices in provinces' centres, and organizations in all cities throughout the country. We believe that the Achilles' heel of the Iranian educational system (both in K-12 and Higher Education) is the centralized system of decision- and policymaking. It means that decisions concerning each educational issue is to be made by the Ministry of Education (in terms of K-12), the Ministry of Science, Research & Technology (MSRT) for Higher Education studies (except medical education), and the Ministry of Health and Medical Education as the main authority to monitor the medical education in Iran. Further, there are few decision-making bodies who portray the general guidelines and paths for educational practices and policies of the country (Commission of Research and Education at the Parliament of Iran, and the Supreme Council of the Cultural Revolution, for instance). Hence, all other members of the educational system within this top-down chart of decision-making do not have much power to modify or amend the decisions and policies according to specific needs, features, and demographic criteria of the regions and districts; rather, almost all are powerless to make change compared to those at the top of the decision- and policy-making chart. It is one of the major concerns which are largely debated and explored through research as well as meetings and symposiums throughout the nation. A review of the threats to success of the universities and higher education institutes (HEIs) throughout the world reminds us that financial dependence of the education sector to the governments, for example, was and still is a major threat to the autonomy of the universities and HEIs. It is even much evident in the centralized educational systems; as, Mehralizadeh (2005), for instance, explores "new reforms in Iran's higher education management system- Transition from centralized to decentralized (University-Based Management – UBM)" specifically in terms of management reforms in "university financing, quality and operational performance, and organization or the university system" (p. 67).

One of the main drawbacks of the educational system might be the all-inclusive focus on training students for the Higher Education level as soon as they are graduated from high school. Iranian students are obliged to pass an annually held nation-wide entrance exam if they aim to pursue their graduate studies in university. The National University Entrance Exam (NUEE) is administered by the National Organization of Educational Testing which is supervised by the MSRT and closely works with both Ministry of Education and MSRT to administer all nation-wide tests as NUEE. Mere focus on higher education as the only key to success in the future has led to an unbelievable urge among students and their families to work as much as possible to pass such a test and get the best ranks to register within one of the most desirable and prestigious fields of medicine or engineering in one of the reputable universities of the country. In this case, almost all focus during K-12 is on preparing students for success in a test which is regarded as the key to future success. Safari (2016) well illuminated how such tests (positively/ negatively) affect almost all educational stakeholders' lives:

The use of tests especially high-stakes tests in each society is regarded as the instruments of control and manipulation of curriculum, education, knowledge,

and behaviors. The harmful consequences of such tests as test bias, unfairness, inequality, lack of ethicality, and impact on individuals' lives and society can hugely undermine the reliability and validity of evaluation procedures, the aftermath of which is nothing but students' extreme anxiety, frustration, and ego-depletion. Assessment processes which are not harmonious with the criteria of humanistic education do not lead to inspiration, and learning. (Safari 2016, p. 290)

All curricula, syllabi and textbooks are also designed and prepared by the Ministry of Education where main stakeholders' (teachers and students) rights, ideologies, voices, and concerns are not heard, met, and acknowledged by the educational authorities of the ministry during preparation of the materials and textbooks. It is disappointing that even teachers have no chance or permission to move further than what is foisted on them by the ministry to teach in the classrooms as everything is preplanned for the high-stakes test (NUEE) at the end of high school. Students are also highly advised to participate in the extra classes in the same schools and in institutions where the focus is largely on teaching students based on some extra textbooks which are developed by those institutions and also training students to learn the techniques to answer NUEE multiple choice tests. Students and their parents are cautioned through different channels (e.g., TV, school and parents meetings, counselling session administered at the schools and in institutions, meetings with gifted and talented students of last year, etc.) that such a test is more like a marathon where each second counts and students' success or failure to get the best rank depends extensively on their knowledge and, of course, the least time they spend on each question to find the answer. In the same vein, Safari and Rashidi (2018) stressed that "it is implied that the hegemony of the high-stakes tests causes test takers and their parents to believe that these tests are the instruments of justice, equality, fairness, and objectivity rather than instruments of power, control, and domination" (p. 137).

In this situation, teachers will have the most contribution to the class while students are passively participating in the classes as they are used to being the recipients of their teachers' knowledge. Teaching in our classes happens at the theoretical level; but the link between learning and its practical use in real contexts is the missing ring of our classes. We even doubt if knowledge is transferred to our students, as we only focus on empowering students with the bulk of available information and data in the textbooks and it led to the demise of training our students. Training creates an environment where students-teacher relationship moves beyond such tough rigid academic correspondences, and students consider their teachers as a model or pioneer whose manner, knowledge, and words shape or even reshape the students' character. It also must be mentioned that medical education is supervised by the Ministry of Health and Medical Education; hence, three ministries are responsible to mandate the main decisions and policies on almost all educational stakeholders throughout the country. Therefore, each region's peculiar characteristics; and the teachers and students' rights, voices, needs, capabilities, and deficiencies in the centralized system of policymaking are not taken into account. In this case, the main recipients of these decisions and policies have no other choice than acknowledgement and execution of those policies which are resembled as rules and regulations in the schools and universities.

Teachers in schools and academic staff at the universities are obliged to work based on the available curricula and syllabi. It is even much more rigid and tough in schools as teachers are highly advised to cover specified pages and topics to meet the deadlines for assessments during the academic year. The institutions outside the schools also provide students with extra classes, textbooks, and testing sessions. They also cooperate with schools to administer their testing sessions in schools; hence, almost all school principals, parents, and teachers' attention maneuvers over students' success in such tests which their results are compared in school,



district, provincial, and national levels to give students a general overview of their understanding and learning through multiple-choice tests. In our classes, there is no time to focus on increasing students' thinking power and introducing them with concepts as critical thinking and critical pedagogy as everything is arranged to expedite the teaching process to help students learn the specified sections and issues which are to be assessed through different assessment sessions during the academic year.

One of the main drawbacks of our K-12 educational system is that students are not professionally trained to identify their own potentials and weaknesses; rather, an unrealistic scenario is portrayed in which success will be attained through the NUÉE and pursuing higher degrees in universities. Students who are trained in such a K-12 educational cycle enter undergraduate level in universities. Academic staff at universities do not suffer from such pressure to cover all pages of a textbook in a specified timeslot; rather, they have authority and freedom to change or modify the textbooks and assessment styles based on the students' level of proficiencies, capabilities, deficiencies and needs. Students, especially in their first year of new academic life as a B.A. or B.Sc. student, consider academic staff as the main authority of the class who knows everything and must rule the class. Despite students' engagement with class activities as assignments or lectures in some sessions, the main prevalent core of teaching is based on teacher-centered practice while students are passive users of teachers' knowledge.

It rarely happens to consider the teaching-learning continuum and students' progress during a semester for their evaluation; however, mid-term or final exams are the teachers' most notable tools to evaluate the students. In this regard, students' main reason for class participation changes from willingness to learn management and leadership techniques, cooperation, tolerance, dialogue, and critical thinking to satisfy their teachers by success on tests which just assess the students' surface understanding of textbooks. Students are usually deprived from learning the techniques to think and the power to analyze surrounding community to challenge the malpractices they witness in their societies and provide the out of school and academia society with solutions based on their learnings as a newly trained proficient social member. In most cases, they even fail to learn the techniques for understanding as what happens in classes is a fear of failure on tests and assessments; hence, students must focus on verbatim memorization of texts, passages, and formula to succeed in their tests. Therefore, deep understanding is not practiced in most of our K-12 and Higher Educational contexts; rather, what happens is shallow thinking and surface understanding. In this case, we witness an unreal exaggeration concerning students' level of knowledge and expertise as Penn (2020) believed that "the least skilled are often the most deluded about their ability" (p. 2). So, our students (both during K-12 and HE) just obtain an illusion of knowing. For instance, during K-12 continuum there is a mere focus on nation-wide annually held high stakes test which is to monitor students who enter the universities. In this regard, students are just taught for the sake of testing. All teaching materials and class activities are developed in a way to help students succeed in multiple-choice tests. As undergraduate students, they also pass different courses which are taught over an academic semester and students are left alone again with no practical use of their previous learning experience in their future studies. In the same vein, Safari (2018) emphasized the urgency of a call for change and reform in students, student teachers, and teachers' character which might be earlier shaped through K-12 and further in Higher Education in Iran.

The researchers identified some studies which explore the students and teachers' lived experiences, their professional development practice, and teaching/ learning experience in public education (K-12) and Higher Education from different perspectives and concerning divergent educational, cultural, political, and practical issues (e.g., Arneback et al., 2017; Asikainen et al., 2018; Caires et al., 2012; Downes, 1993; Haugen, 2020; Kardos & Johnson, 2010; Kaufmann et al., 2002; Marais & Meier, 2004; Martinez et al., 2016; Mukeredzi &

Mandrona, 2013; Osler, 1998; Pancsofar & Petroff, 2016; Ramsden et al., 2007; Stuart & Thurlow, 2000; Sun, 2015; Thulin & Redfors, 2017a, 2017b; Trigwell et al., 2005; Wade et al., 1999; West et al., 2016; Wilkins & Lall, 2011).

However, still there is a lack of knowledge which assures the researchers that no research has explored the students' transition experience from K-12 to Higher Education especially through students' drawings and paintings. Further, in the educational context of Iran, teachers and university instructors are highly advised to stick to the prescribed clichéd syllabi which are developed by the authorities who are at the top of the power pyramid in the policy-making bodies (presidency, parliament, ministries, and other members/ organizations out of the educational context). In this regard, teachers, and students (in both K-12 and HE levels) are taken for granted in almost all educational policies. So, there should be research practices which explore the main stakeholders' views, ideas, and feedback towards their dismissed right and voice in the educational policies. Further, it gives hints and clues to the researchers to explore such a theme within different contexts with the same or different policies and power distribution among its stakeholders. Therefore, we aim to explore the university students' feedback towards K-12 educational practices in Iran; their ideals about HE studies, and the reality they experienced during their undergraduate studies.

It is an obligation for researchers and educational practitioners to unearth students' attitudes and experiences concerning the twelve-year continuum of learning in schools and the changes they witness as soon as they enter universities and experience a new academic life as a higher education student. These changes might happen in the context of teacher-student relationships, teaching workload in each session, students' assignments, students' assessment, teachers' evaluation criteria to assess students, and teaching-learning environment. To do this, we need real lived experiences of the main stakeholders of the educational policies (K-12 and HE) which, unfortunately, are taken for granted by the authorities of the governments. It means students and teachers (K-12 and HE) are obliged to use the curricula, materials, as well as policies which are developed with no assessment of the students' proficiencies, their needs, teachers' competencies, their experiences, as well as equal availability of and access to the 21<sup>st</sup> century technology throughout the country. It usually happens within the centralized systems of policymaking and the educational system of Iran is also no exception. In this regard, we aim to investigate students' experience of transition from K-12 to Higher Education in Iran, specifically through the innovative method of data collection through drawings. Nowadays, comparative studies are of great importance among educational researchers worldwide. On the other hand, professional development among teachers, students, employees, managers, and leaders is of great importance among researchers worldwide; however, still there is no research on the experience of students' transmission from K-12 to higher education of students within the context of Iran which two distinct ministries oversee K-12 and higher education respectively. In this regard, this research brings novel ideas for the educational policymakers and government authorities to identify the real context of education. Further, it gives hints and clues to the researchers to explore such a theme within different contexts with the same or different policies and power distribution among its stakeholders. Finally, the present research uses drawings to collect data which gives students more power to indirectly voice their inner thoughts and views as paintings speak louder than words.

## **Research Context**

English is taught as a foreign language in Iran. Though it is not used as a means of communication in everyday talks and dialogues, English is the language of science as mostly cited Iranian researchers are those whose research studies and worldwide collaborations are administered and disseminated in English. Further, it is also a sign of prestige among most

Iranian families as it is largely taught in the private English language institutes outside the schools and campuses. Iranian students just get an illusion of knowing English through K-12 as the focus is on teaching grammatical points and reading comprehension, rather than communication skills. In our educational context, we must pass annually held nation-wide high stakes test to enter universities. English is also one of the main sections for all students who participate in such a test as a general test (vocabulary, grammar, and reading comprehension test). Those students who are also willing to pursue their higher studies in English are obliged to participate in such a high stakes test with specific focus on English. However, in this case, students' knowledge, and proficiencies in terms of vocabulary, grammar, and reading comprehension are tested. So, there is not much focus on listening and speaking as most class time slots are devoted to teaching materials based on the educational policies to prepare students for success on a high stakes test to enter the universities.

Students of English at the university level also fail to be empowered with listening and speaking proficiencies as they just must pass two four-credit courses of Listening and Comprehension (with the main focus on improving students' proficiency in speaking) during their first and second academic semesters. So, in most cases, the teachers are obliged to use both English and Persian as the languages of instruction in English classrooms as we have to meet all students' needs and concerns. However, there are some proficient students in English with prior learning experience in the English language institutes. As already mentioned, two types of students participate in our classrooms in terms of their proficiency in English. The main problem and concern is that our national educational curricula and syllabi fails to meet such a concern as everything is devised and developed for optimum success in the courses without considering students' background in terms of access to learning opportunities, educational facilities, and English language institutes.

We believe that the current educational context especially in the undergraduate level for teaching English is not fair as the students' knowledge and proficiencies are taken for granted and teachers expect optimum success from all the students. We believe that teachers must take much active roles (manager, friend, counsellor, parent, etc.) than a mere teacher. Further, our academic staff try to stick to those clichéd curricula and syllabi (though updated frequently) as it gives them a sense of security and safety. In this case, all the students' excuses will be referred to the educational decisions and policies.

We need to empower our students with the novel ideas, concepts, and key terms which are largely discussed and practiced within the global realm of education. In this regard, in most of the classes, we introduced the key theories and ideas of critical pedagogy, critical thinking, and critical literacy. It needs to be highlighted that these concepts are not excessively discussed and taught in our classes as students might just get an overview during graduate studies. Though, it puts much burden on the teacher; however, students were enthusiastic to hear such novel ideas as students are used to be passive recipients of their teachers' knowledge. The nature of our course (Study Skills) also provides us with a chance to maneuver over these ideas. Our students had a chance to learn from the ideas of Paulo Freire, Peter McLaren, and Henry Giroux (through available videos on YouTube). Further, we had numerous discussions about our understandings from the talks and videos.

## **Methodology**

### ***Research Practice (Design, Collection, Analysis)***

Our research practice adopts Phenomenological Research Design as it “aims to reveal and interpret individual perceptions related to a specific phenomenon” (Cengelci Kose & Gurdogan Bayir, 2016, p. 184). Groenewald (2004, p. 44) also mentioned that “the aim of the

researcher is to describe as accurately as possible the phenomenon, refraining from any pre-given framework, but remaining true to the facts.” Holroyd (2001, p. 2) believed that it “attempts to explicate the meaning structures developed through the experience of the person being questioned.” In the same line, Polkinghorne (1989, p. 41) emphasized that “[t]he phenomenological map refocuses inquiry, concentrating not on descriptions of worldly objects but on descriptions of experience.”

A total number of 60 first year undergraduate students from three fields of study: English Translation (19: 8 M/ 11 F), English Literature (20: 4 M/ 16 F), and Teaching English as a Foreign Language (21 F/ Girls Campus), who recently joined university were participating students of the present research. Study Skills is one of the courses which they are obliged to pass in the first semester. The main reason behind such a course is to introduce newly joined students to Higher Education with new teaching practices and assessment styles which they are supposed to experience. They are supposed to learn the techniques for successful learning experience which is also different from their twelve years of experience in K-12 educational cycle. Hence, our aim was to investigate the students’ feedback concerning their experience in the K-12 educational system, their expectation from university, and the real experience of living in university as an undergraduate student. Students were asked to draw their understanding concerning the differences between K-12 and Higher Education (in line with main queries of research) with no further comments and feedback. However, they had permission to include captions, further notes, or phrases to help get the main idea of their drawings. Students were supposed to submit their drawings on the final exam day; so, they had a two-week-interval from last session at the class till exam date to work on their drawings based on their understandings and impressions concerning the ideals and realities of K-12 and Higher Education. It was also a new idea when the instructor asked the students to voice their ideas and beliefs as drawings. They also provided further feedback in their final exams about their drawings. The instructor also had a chance to get some students’ feedback through email if he was doubtful about his understanding from the drawings.

It also needs to be highlighted that there was no need to obtain permission from the university where the research is administered; as teaching staff can submit the course syllabus as well as lesson plans to the department and vice-chancellor of education at the corresponding faculty. In this regard, all teaching class materials, course objectives, assessment criteria, and students’ mid-term or final projects are explained therein. We informed the students that their drawings will be used for a research practice; hence, they were aware of the research queries. We assured them that their identifying information will not be shared with third-party groups and citations to their works will be anonymous in the main research. So, their privacy is completely observed by the researchers. Further, academic staff are obliged to consider the main core, goals, and objectives of the courses; however, they can modify the materials for each course (based on the students’ needs, proficiencies, and the prerequisites of the 21<sup>st</sup> century teaching practice).

We used the students’ drawings and images to portray their own experience concerning transmission from K-12 to Higher Education as the main tool for data collection. Weber and Mitchell (1995) explained:

Images are constructed and interpreted in attempts to make sense of human experience and to communicate that sense to others. Images in turn become part of human experience and are thus subject to reconstructions and reinterpretations. While images always maintain some connection to people, places, things, or events, their generative potential in a sense gives them a life of their own, so that we not only create images, but are also shaped by them. (p. 21)

In another research, Johnson (2002) also used visual images and drawings and mentioned that “[t]he student teachers in my study used primarily visual language to reflect critically on teaching. Each constructed a picture book about some aspect of their prior practicum experiences in secondary schools” (p. 390). In the same vein, Johnson (2004) tried to “encourage teachers to use a visual and verbal approach to storytelling as a method of critical reflection” (p. 423). Further, Moya Guijarro and Pinar Sanz (2008) illuminated that “[t]he analysis of the representational meaning shows that there is a predominance of narrative patterns, more specifically reaction images as the narrative are basically created by eyelines” (p. 1616). Moreover, Moya Guijarro (2011) also concluded that “a comparison between the verbal and non-verbal semiotic modes, show that images seem to contribute more than words to the identification of the viewer with the main characters in the story” (p. 2982). So, drawings are the main source of data collection in this research as Briell et al. (2010) also emphasized that “drawings can be a useful tool for exploring students’ epistemological beliefs, a tool best accompanied with explanations” (p. 657).

There are so many other research practices which adopted visual reflections (images and drawings) as a source of data which convey much more ideologies and voices which cannot be expressed orally or in written classroom assignments (e.g., Bessette, 2008; Finson, 2002; Haney et al., 2004; Löfström & Nevgi, 2014; Murphy et al., 2004; Weber & Mitchell, 1996). Although, researchers throughout the world are using drawings (especially in the realm of education) as a comprehensive tool to unearth participants’ inner thoughts, ideologies, and thinking, Safari’s (2020) research practice in the ELT (English Language Teaching) context of Iran as she investigated her students’ portrayal of their future identity and character as an English language teacher. In a more recent research, Tang, Won, and Treagust (2019, p. 2296) also worked on “the development, description, application, and discussion of an analytical framework to examine students’ drawings of scientific concepts and processes” as drawings and images can speak louder than words. Further, participants feel much secure and relaxed to express their views and ideas through images as an indirect channel to voice their inner thoughts.

To analyze the collected data as well as students’ feedback about their drawings (obtained through final exam and email correspondence) to identify concepts, categories, and themes (Table 1); we adopted thematic analysis to exclude the embedded ideologies and voices as final themes. Starks and Trinidad (2007) highlight that “interpretive methods distill textual data to a set of categories or concepts from which the final product can be drawn” (p. 1375). To do so, we adopted Terry’s et al. (2017) Thematic Analysis (TA) procedures to analyze the enriched gathered data (through drawings, students’ notes and explanations, as well as email correspondences). According to Terry et al. (2017):

The first phase of TA, “familiarising with the data,” is a process that can begin during data collection. The second phase involves “generating codes” to immerse the researcher more deeply in the data and create the building blocks of analysis. It is likely that as coding progresses, the researcher starts to see similarities and notice patterns across the data. However, it is important to stay focused on coding the entire dataset before moving from coding to “constructing themes” in the third phase. The themes the researcher develops at this point are like draft versions of a piece of writing – not fixed, and flexibly open to change – with the fourth phase involving “reviewing potential themes.” There are a number of techniques and questions to guide progress to “defining and naming themes,” and then finally developing the entire analysis during the sixth and final phase, “producing the report.” Writing the report offers the final

opportunity to make changes that strengthen the analysis and effectively communicate the analyst's story of the data. (p. 23)

**Table 1**  
*Emerged Themes from Students' Drawings, Notes, and Feedback (K-12 & Higher Education)*

<b>Educational Cycle</b>	<b>Prevalent Concepts</b>	<b>Earlier Themes</b>	<b>Final Emerged Theme</b>
<b>K-12</b>	Transmission of knowledge; No chance to choose the topics; Konkour (NUEE) stress and pressure; Competition with students to enter universities; Numerous useless courses; Exams; Stress of exams to enter the university;	Change of Educational Focus from Testing to Learning Process	Twelve-year Students' Experience in K-12: Urgency of Reform in Educational System
	Single study; numerous information; No cooperation; Assignment load is high; Fear of teachers' and school principals lead to class participation; One single authority to transmit the knowledge; Students' overloaded mind with useless information;	Transmission of Knowledge in 21st Century	
	No time to meet with friends; No free time; No creativity; Monologue class led by teacher; Parents' total supervision; Tough and rigid school schedule; University is the future; Suppression of students' creative mind; Lots of ambitions and goals to enter university; School = Prison;	No Professional Training for Future & True Success Road through University	
<b>Higher Education</b>	Doubt about major; Job opportunity; Fear of future; No difference with K-12; Lots of assignments and pressure; Economic chaos;	Students are looking for Professional Training, but Teaching happens in Theoretical Level	Higher Education: The Other Side of the Coin
	Teacher cultivates ideas and creativity; High assignment loads; ; Confusion; Future is not clear; University asks for money; Dream castle build in K-12 is collapsed; No dreams left;	University is not the Right Choice: Students are Deceived	
	Students' passive mind; Looking for job; Coming to university with lots of ambitions and dreams; Stress of exams for success and get a degree; Active participation in class but PASSIVE;	University Limits Creativity and Produces Knowledge-workers	
<b>Students' Expectations and Ideals (K-12 &amp; Higher Education)</b>	Different atmosphere; Critical looks; Progress based on knowledge and wisdom; Students feel empowered and free from parents' pressure; Students' freedom and power to participate; Place for love and friendship; No class participation; Free to sleep; More dialogue and friendship; Caring and sharing; Students are advised to have creative mind; Teachers encourage students to transform their information to knowledge and wisdom; Teacher as a ladder; Lots of fun and ambitions; Freedom;		K-12 & Higher Education: Students' Preference

## Results

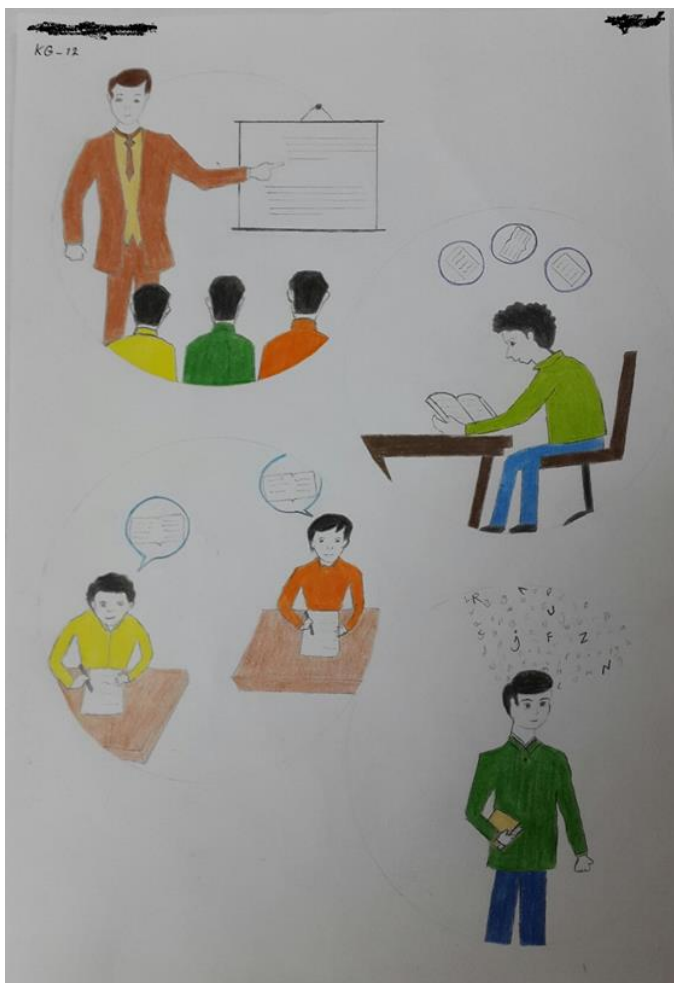
### *Twelve-year Students' Experience in K-12: Urgency of Reform in Educational System*

The following three main themes emerged from students' drawings concerning K-12:

**Change of Educational Focus from Testing to Learning Process.** Iranian students experience lots of pressure due to exhaustive emphasis on testing and assessment from early days at school. We rarely witness teachers who are free to change or modify their weekly schedule as they also are under pressure by the school principals to execute exactly what is assigned on them from the authorities of the ministries. Teachers are obliged to finalize textbooks and specified topics in a tough schedule and timely testing are administered to check if the students progress based on the proposed syllabi and curricula. Students are overloaded with extensive chunks of data and information which are of no use for them. They are just supposed to memorize whatever is discussed within both covers of each textbook to answer teachers' made questions which leave no place for students' thinking; rather, verbatim memorization is promoted (Figures 1 & 2):

**Figure 1**

*Student's Emphasis on Testing and No Joint Work*



**Figure 2**

*Students' Negative Expressions Concerning Tough Daily Schedules and Fear of Testing*



I remember from early days at the primary school that parents are talking about the financial/ psychological pressure of testing on students. They were concerned about my future if I will be successful in Konkour (کنکور) for a brilliant future. Unfortunately, I was under sever pressure to memorize textbook content to get good grades in tests. (Student #14)

Our class hours leave no time to talk with peers and teacher in the class! We are bombarded with numerous materials and assignments. We even do not have much time for collaboration in the class. (Student #43)

**Transmission of Knowledge in 21<sup>st</sup> Century.** We still witness (almost in all classrooms) that teachers dismiss students' active role in Question and Answer (Q&A) style of dialogue and cooperation. Teachers consider one hour and half classroom time slot as its own possession that should be completely assigned to teaching practice and training is totally dismissed. Students are also passively sitting in their own seats (like cinema) while we rarely have circle or semi-circle classrooms to help students have eye-contact with each other and have the chance to talk and cooperate. Students must well listen to teachers' notes and talks with a hope not to miss even a minor point from teachers' talks (Figures 3, 4, & 5).

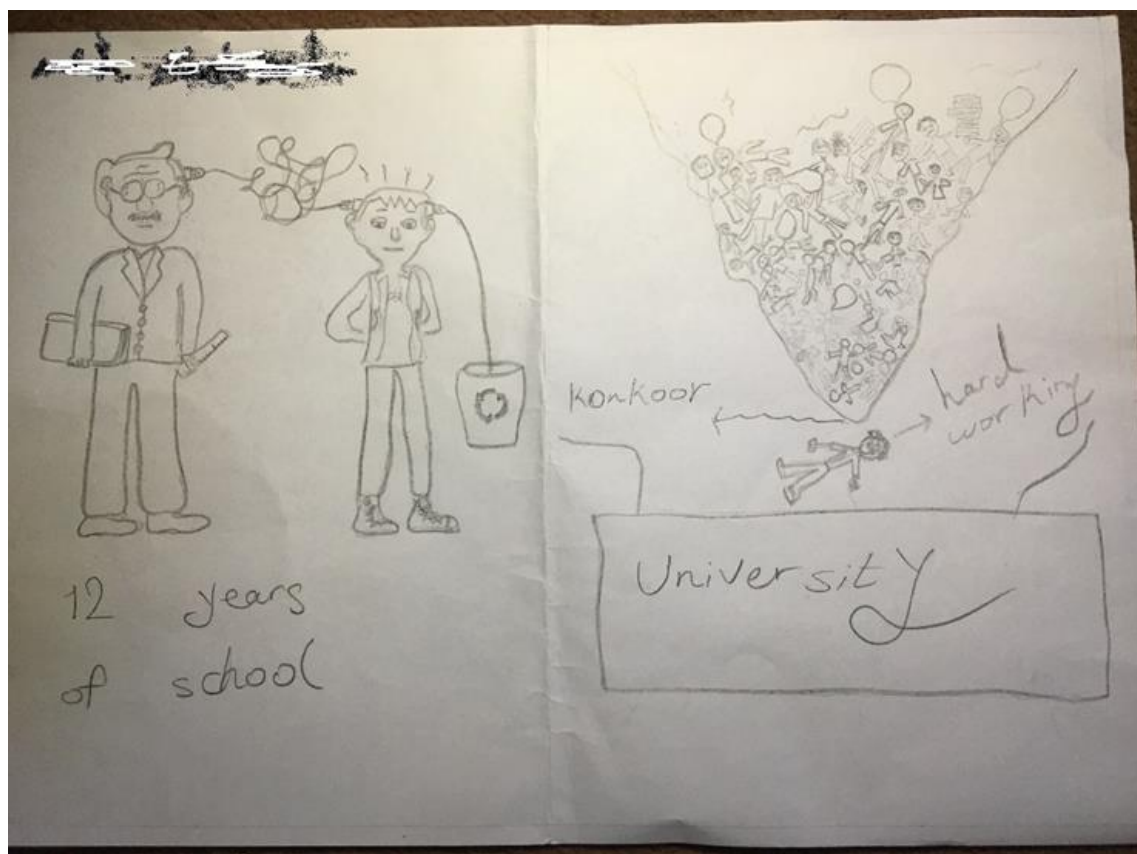


**Figure 3**

*Student's Emphasis on Assignment Workload*

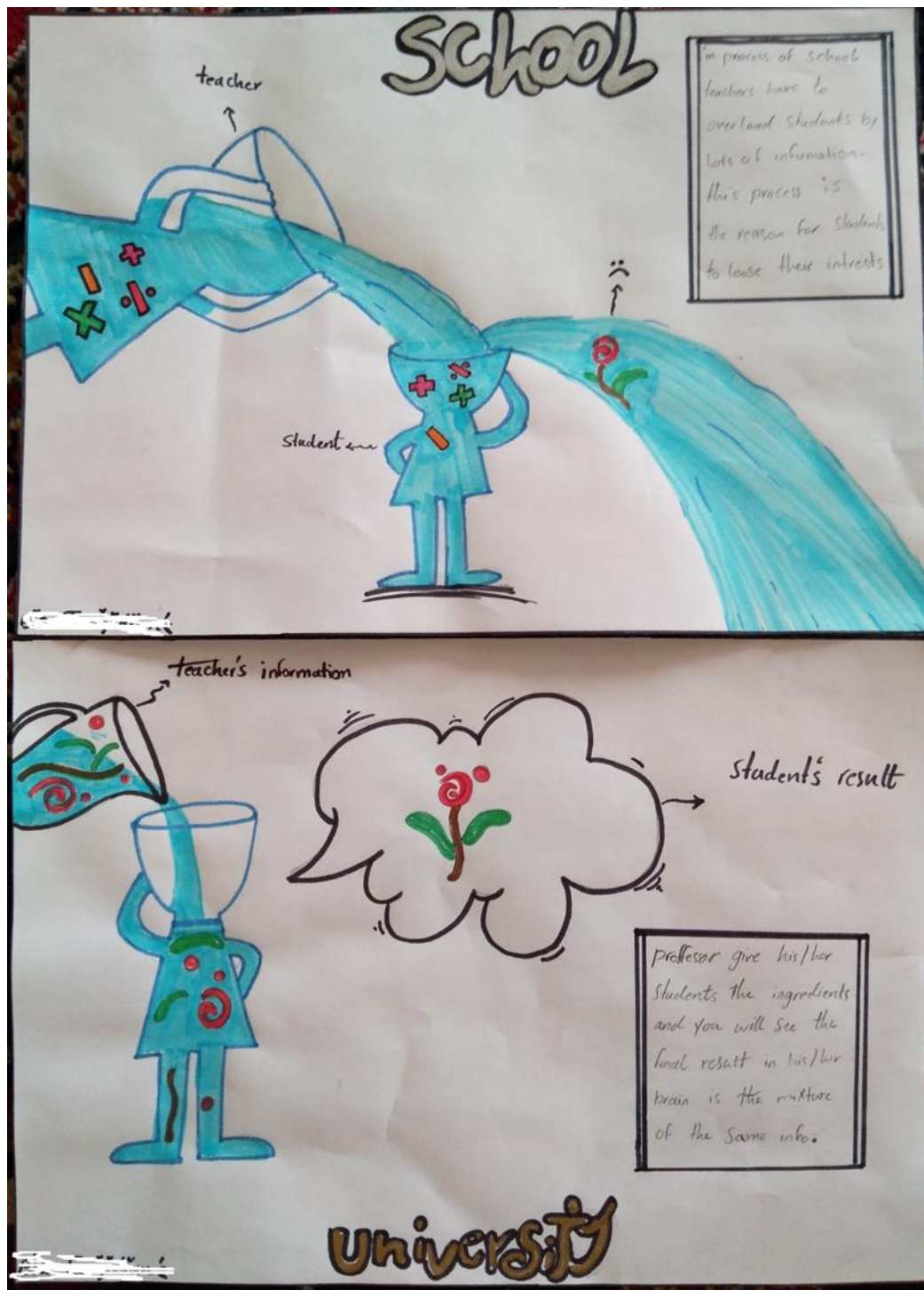
**Figure 4**

*Student's Feeling Concerning Useless Transmitted Data! No Knowledge.*



**Figure 5**

*Student's Concerning Demise of Her Creative Mind in School*

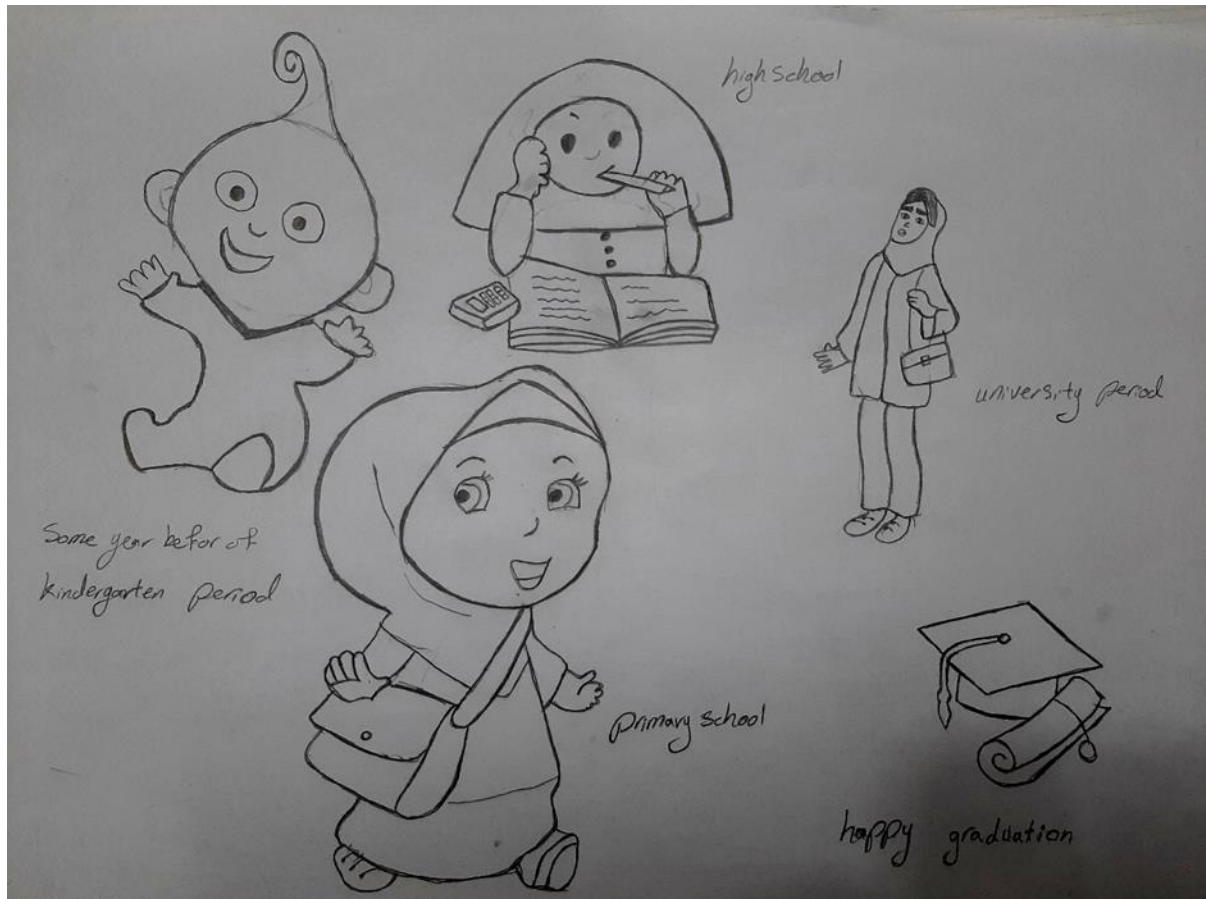


Our teachers just give priority to teaching syllabi and materials to be covered in the class. We are suffering from lack of free time both in class and out of the school. We are just supposed to be prepared for question and answer in the next session based on the transferred chunks of data in previous sessions. (Student #23)

**No Professional Training for Future & True Success Road through University.** Unfortunately, everything is arranged for success in university as there is no other way left for a prosperous life outside the school context. We also have vocational training for students in the educational system of Iran if they do not prefer to study at high schools. Iranian students are taught specifically based on the courses which are to be tested in NUEE (Figures 6, 7, & 8).

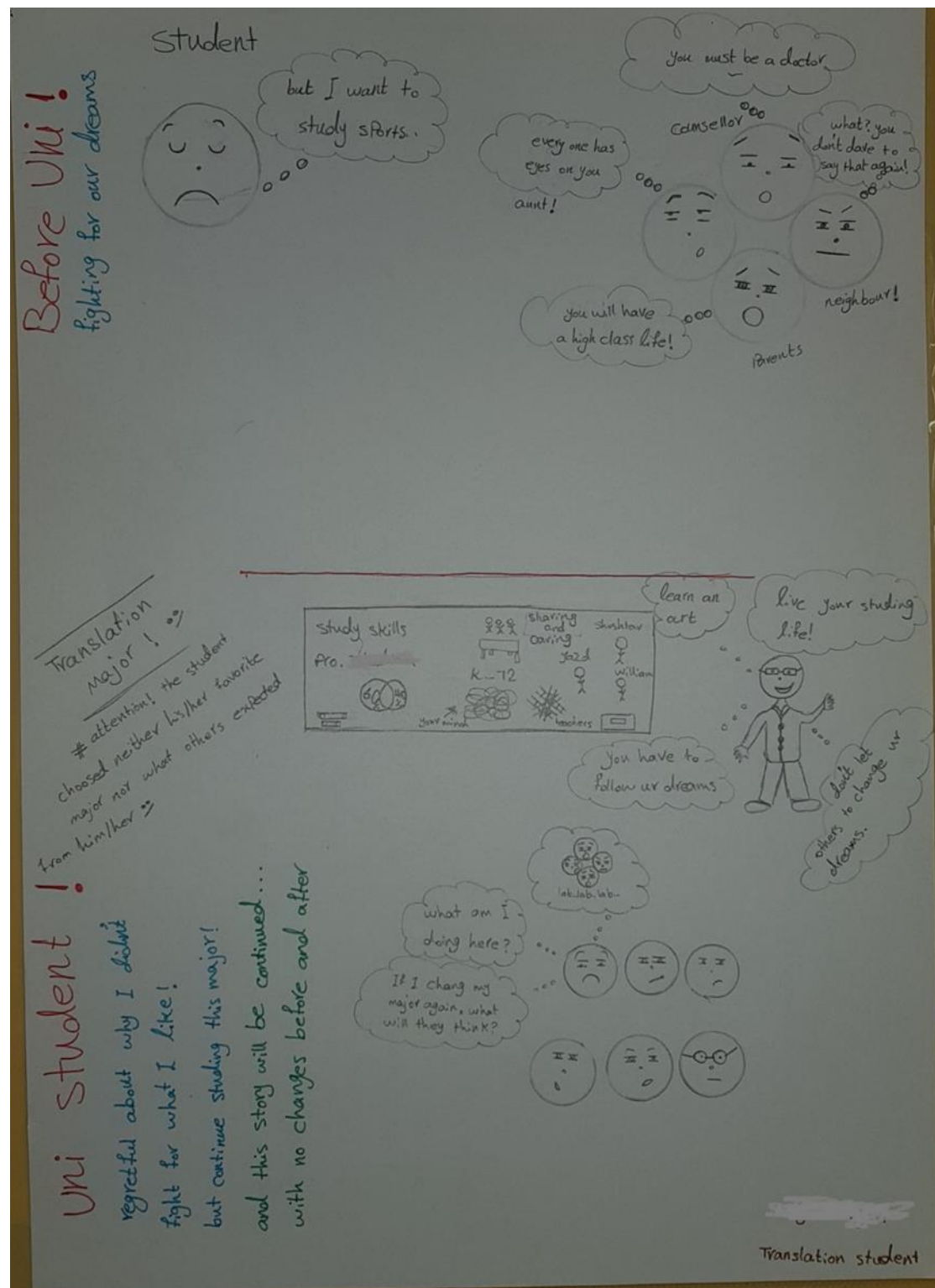
**Figure 6**

*Student's Portrayal of Her K-12 and Higher Education Cycle! Happy Graduation = No Life!*



**Figure 7**

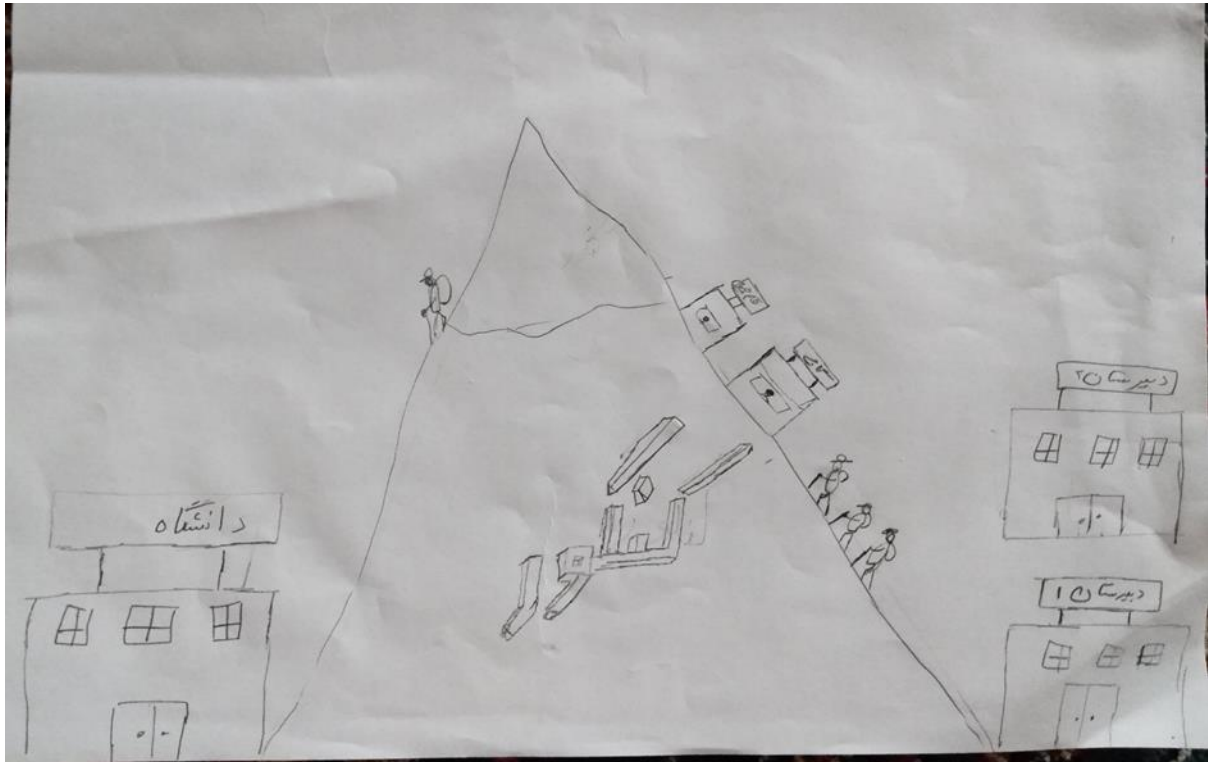
*Student is Under Pressure by People and He/She is Not Satisfied with His/Her Field of Study in University*





**Figure 8**

*Pressure on Students and Parents to Succeed in NUEE (Konkur)! All Work hard and Most Fail!*



We remember the idiom “No pain, No gain”! But we are not trained to succeed in professional life. We are just cautioned and advised to study as much as possible to enter the university as successful future is through higher education. We do not have courses related to entrepreneurship! (Student #09)

We do not learn how to balance our studies through K-12 with job vacancies in the job market out of the school. We do not know the available vacant positions and societies’ needs. We are just asked to compete with each other in our classrooms to get the best grades and succeed in tests. Our parents are happy if we meet the school staff’s priorities (meticulously follow their guidelines to learn the chunks of knowledge available in the textbooks). We are not trained to put into practice our learned materials during the class. (Student #38)

### ***Higher Education: The Other Side of the Coin***

The following three main themes emerged from students’ drawings concerning Higher Education:

**Students are Looking for Professional Training, but Teaching Happens in Theoretical Level.** Students are continuously motivated during K-12 (especially high school) that life and study style in university is different from what is practiced in K-12. Cooperation and joint study practice is emphasized in the universities, there is no much emphasis on testing, students are engaged with teaching practice through collaboration and dialogue, and teachers are not the main authority of the class. On the contrary, in most cases, students are overwhelmed with much theoretical teaching loads and assignments than the whole educational

cycle through K-12 and it remains nothing than confusion for the students (Figures 9, 10, & 11).

**Figure 9**

*Student's Emphasis that There's No Difference Between K-12 & Higher Education*



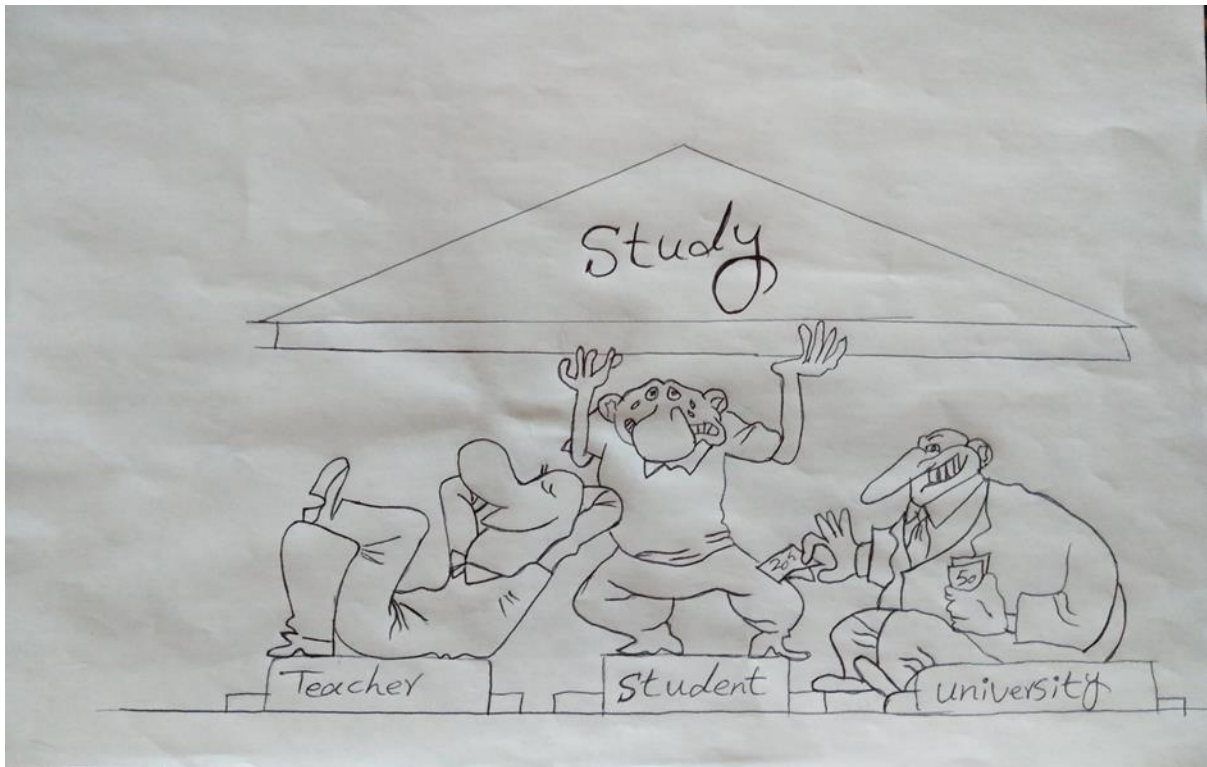
**Figure 10**

*Student's Pressure Both in K-12 & Higher Education*



**Figure 11**

*Students are Under Pressure Due to Teaching/Assignments Overload*



Teaching load, assignments, and psychological pressure are the same as our experience in schools. Our instructors emphasize on assessment as soon as academic year commences. We experience single study as not time is left for group work. Sharing and caring are missing ring of our educational system in higher education. (Student # 02)

Still no collaboration. No joint project! We are not trained for joint collaborations during K-12. Extensive focus and stress on assessment and how to get the best grades make us single robots who care about our own success! We rarely are trained how to join communities of two and more for work and professional life! (Student #51)

**University is not the Right Choice: Students are Deceived.** Students enter university to pursue higher degrees for a prosperous life. It happens if students are well trained based on the available job market outside the university. Unfortunately, there is no wise analysis of outside of university community to identify society needs and social problems and crises. Hence, graduate students with bachelor's degrees have no other choice than continuing their studies at master's or Ph.D. levels. Unfortunately, there is no balance between number of university graduates and available job vacancies based on the university degrees; therefore, most graduates are under sever pressure and it also leads to further social crises among families (Figures 12, 13, & 14):



**Figure 12**

*Student's Disappointment to See What's Happening in University is Different from Her Expectations*





**Figure 13**

Student Enters University for a Well-paid Permanent Job Position

**Figure 14**

Student's Goal to Study at University After Graduation



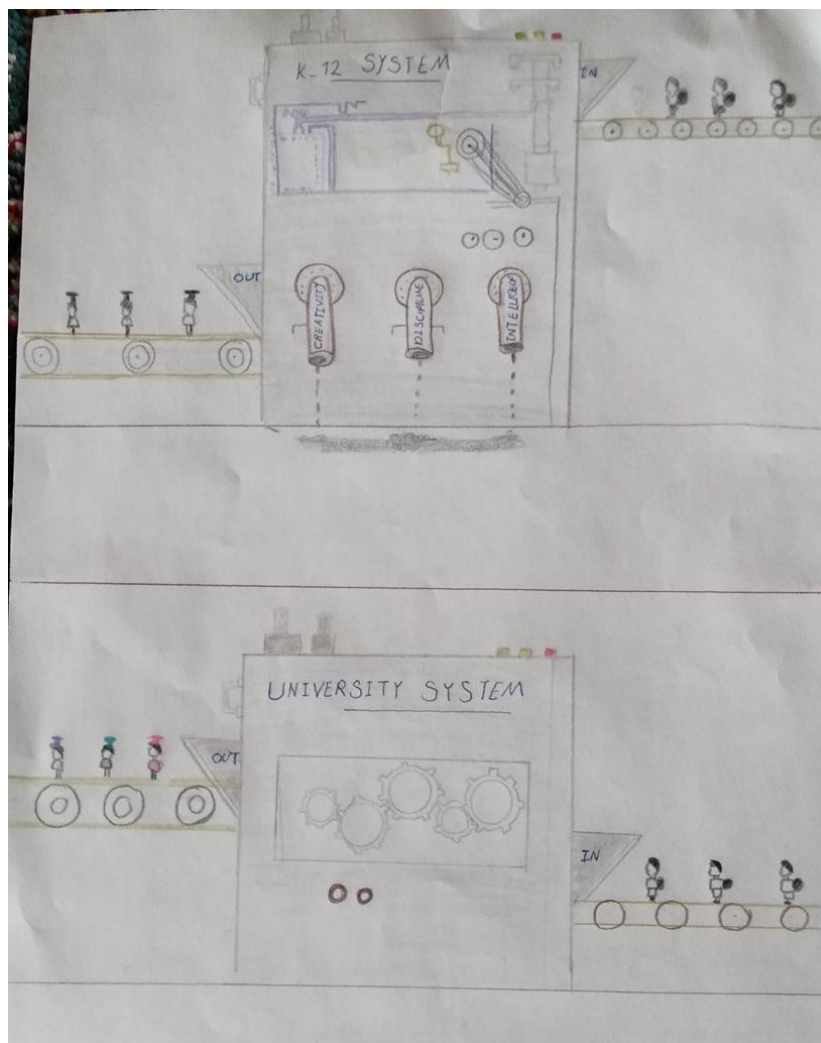
There is no balance between our studies, graduation rates, and available job vacancies in the society. Graduates of English can teach English in private language institutes. Payment rate is so low; however, we can use our proficiency for a good career. There are no vacancies for graduates of social

sciences and humanities. The same is also true for graduates of engineering. Almost all graduates are not satisfied with their jobs after graduation. There is no match between our fields of study and available job positions out of the universities. We are deceived by the educational decisions and policies during K-12! (Student #55)

**University Limits Creativity and Produces Knowledge-Workers.** One of the main drawbacks of our current universities is that most of them are engaged in unreal competitions to win the race in university ranking databases. Most universities urge their academic staff to focus on graduate students to collaboratively work on joint research studies to increase the university ranking in international rankings. Almost all universities are moving towards internationalization of higher education; hence, again much focus is on international joint research studies. In this line, undergraduate students are usually stuck in the theoretical level. Students come to university to increase their competencies and potentials; but what is happening is dismissal of their primary needs and wants which help them progress in their academic and personal life. Students are under pressure by loads of assignments and test pressures; therefore, their ideals and ambitions decrease during four-year-continuum of bachelor's degrees (Figure 15):

**Figure 15**

*Denial of Students' Creativity*



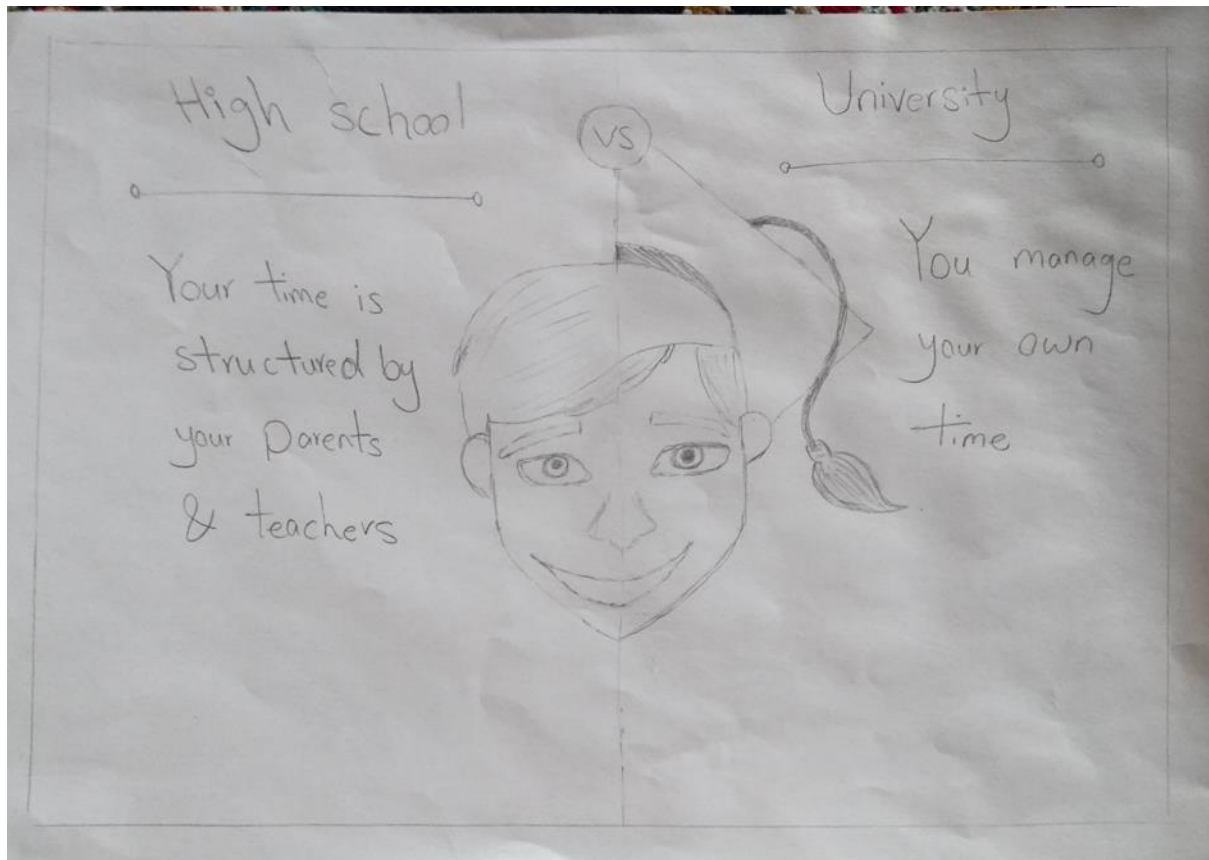
Teaching load during each semester leaves no space for collaboration. Creativity occurs through students' collaboration and dialogue. It is also true about students from other fields of study who are living in the dorms. I like to run workshops on the topics of my interest; however, it is not feasible as we are bombarded with bulk of academic stuff to handle. We also receive no promising feedback from our friends due to their commitment to assignments which just remain at the theoretical level. We do not learn by memorization! (Student #06)

### ***K-12 & Higher Education: Students' Preference***

Our participating students also presented some drawings concerning their preference to choose their twelve-year-cycle of education or new academic life in university. Although, students presented illuminating ideas in their drawings; however, they preferred lifestyle in university (Figures 16, 17, 18, & 19).

**Figure 16**

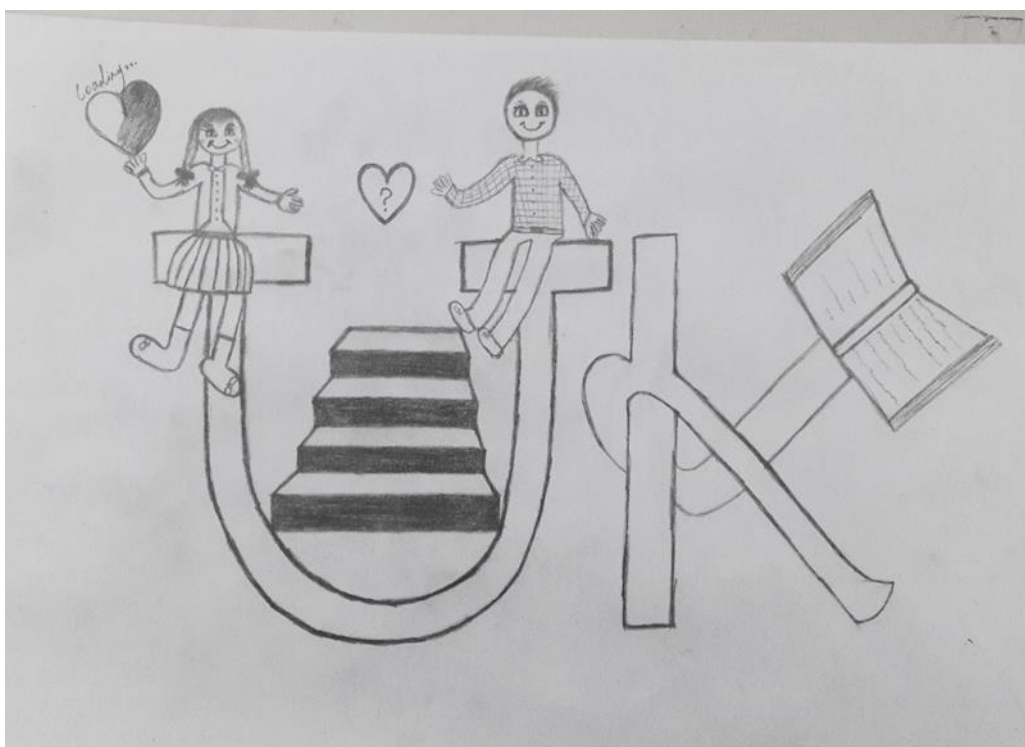
*Student's Preference to Live in University*



**Figure 17**  
*Students' Lifestyles in University!*



**Figure 18**  
*Students Have More Freedom and Enjoy Co-Education*





**Figure 19**

*Students Consider Teachers as Ladder to Success Not Transmitter of Knowledge*



Thanks to the emergent of new technologies and access to numerous sources of data, students are aware of the (mal)practices, (in)justices, and discrepancies within the educational systems of the countries. Most students were aware of the best practices in education in countries like Finland, Germany, and Japan. They were eager to present mini lectures about the educational systems of other countries for their friends in the class. In this regard, almost all students raised critical issues and views concerning their 13-year experience prior to the university as well as their living experience on-campus as undergraduate students.

Our textbooks through K-12 are not updated. We do not learn about the educational systems of other countries. We are not trained for successful living out of the school. We are not provided with opportunities after high school except university studies. It seems we are confined to study all our life. (Student #60)

Courses like law, entrepreneurship, and business should be mandatory for all undergraduates. We enter undergraduate level with the same mentality toward life as it was during our high school. We are trained in a way that success is to have a Ph.D. (Student #48)

The problem is that politicians make critical decisions about our educational issues. There should be a balance between the power of us (as students and our teachers in university) and those at the top hierarchy of decision-making. It

seems our universities also have no much power to show their authority. Each academic staff tries not to challenge the authorities of the university with a fear of losing their jobs. It seems job security is more important for them than student' professional development. (Student #28)

## Discussion

Educational policies in K-12 and Higher Education must be in total alignment with each other to help educational governors and policymakers achieve the goals in the national plans and future horizons of the state. In an era when the focus is on continuous monitoring of changes in global levels (students and teachers' professional development through K-12 and HE, teachers' recruitment policies in K-12 and HE, financial support for students, internationalization of education and higher education, students' mobility, marginalized students, minorities, school principals and university leadership, and etc.); almost all educational decisions and policies are made based on the 21<sup>st</sup> century skills. Students, student teachers, teacher educators, and educational stakeholders must be aware of their voice, rights, needs, and competencies. The next vital part of our policies must be reminding those at the top of the power pyramid to consider educational stakeholders' rights and values.

Our research findings can help educational policy-makers that there is an urgent call for reform and change in educational policies of Iran (for instance, students and teachers' engagement in materials development both at the K-12 and HE levels, engagement of parents in school leadership through K-12, review of the available job vacancies out of the schools and campuses to avoid students' registration in fields of study with no chance for employment, giving more authority to school principals and university leadership team in terms of their self-financing plans and financial support sources based on their regions, balance between ministries responsible for education (K-12, HE, Medical education), and etc.). There should be a change of focus from testing (output-oriented assessment) to process-oriented assessment; hence, students will have no fear of failure in tests. Our teachers will have much power to modify and amend textbooks and materials (even syllabi) based on the students' current levels of knowledge. Our teachers (both at K-12 and Higher Education) still believe in transmission model of education where students are empty minds which are ready to absorb what teachers explain in the classrooms. Findings of our research help teachers and educational practitioners to confess that teachers' all-knowing character is no longer of use in the era of 21<sup>st</sup> century; rather, students must be considered as teachers' partners in the classrooms. Students must cooperate with their teachers to learn the bases of management and leadership. Our research reminds teachers that, nowadays, we need coaches and mentors than mere teachers. Our students need role models than transmitters of theories. Our research helps educational policymakers learn that students need to be empowered as human entities than receivers of knowledge. It also needs to be considered that our teachers must differentiate between information and knowledge. To do this, teachers must have freedom and power. It will happen if the focus of educational decisions and policies changes from training students for the sake of testing to train students for life outside the boundaries of classrooms and schools.

It is one of the rare research studies in the educational context of Iran with its novelty in data collection tool and provides innovative research findings to portray the students' inner voices and ideologies concerning educational (mal)practices and (in)justices in educational system of Iran. However, if K-12 and Higher Education in Iran is to experience much more progress and Iranian students experience competency for success in the 21<sup>st</sup> century; the most immediate prescription is to move from centralized system of educational policymaking to decentralized system of educational decision and policymaking.

However, the present research also was confined to some limitations. The participants were students of English; hence, the instructor can provide them with the most innovative recent resources available for teaching at the university levels. So, students of other fields of study might not have the proficiency to read textbooks, articles, and global reports concerning the best practices for teaching/ learning in the schools and colleges. Academic staff, also, might not have the potential and tendency to include some further materials which are not within their clichéd curricula. In this regard, other researchers throughout the world might consider replication of such research within other fields of study to see if there would be differences among fields of study. Other researchers might also consider teachers (both during K-12 and HE) as the participants to explore their feedback through drawings. We also aimed to explore the students' feedback within their last year of high school; however, we received no permission to participate in the high school classes to administer the research. Therefore, other researchers might also consider a comparative study among the students (within their last year of high school) as well as those who are within their first year of studies as an undergraduate student.

The present research is not context specific as using drawings and other visual methods of data collection are increasing worldwide. The reports of the research would be of interest to those who are working on comparative education throughout the world and can bring further novel ideas to the field if joint research administers worldwide.

Once again, we need to remind the educational policymakers about the taken for granted role of students and teachers (as the main stakeholders of education in K-12 and HE) within each step of decision- and policymaking within the realm of education. If suppression of students - as source of assets and talents- happens within the educational cycle of the countries; we will train a generation of incompetent members for our societies who are not proficient enough to create prosperous future within their regions. We need to modify and remodify our previously as well as newly made educational decisions and policies if we aim to join the community of globally recognized communities as an enriched technological idealistic scientific country.

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